

*“The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance,
it is the illusion of knowledge.”*

-Stephen Hawking

March 15, 2016

Dear Legislators Involved with HB4822:

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and listen to the public's concerns with HB4822. As a member of Decoding Dyslexia MI, I sent a version of this letter to the House Education Committee Members back in September 2015 as well as Senators Knollenberg and Colbeck in January 2016 and I am now sending it to all Senate Education Committee members as well as my district's rep (Ken Horn who is not on the Ed. Committee) and asking that this letter be included in the folders. While I recognize the length of this letter, it was difficult to reduce it as I have a unique experience being a teacher who has transformed her teaching and the success of her students as a result of having my own children with dyslexia and being the special education teacher of one of them. This unique privilege allowed me to lift the veil that was clouding the very large elephant in the room, dyslexia. Gaining this perspective is undeniably beneficial to my caseload of students and their families who no longer see a deep, dark tunnel of doom. Educating my students and their families about the strengths of people with dyslexia has built their confidence and empowered them to look toward a brighter future filled with possibilities. Providing them with the best literacy instruction designed for their learning styles is an essential component of their current and future success.

Unfortunately, none of this came from my university education or professional development over the past 25 years. All of it came as a result of understanding the quote at the top of this letter along with the grit and determination of a scared mother and teacher who was willing to admit that we are disillusioned in the area of teaching struggling readers and spellers. It's not easy to admit that our vision is clouded because admission comes with guilt. Guilt for not having the appropriate education and training to reach all those who came before this new perspective. Guilt for once allowing myself to go with the flow and *not* think beyond the norm of educational society that says, “*some people just aren't going to be able to read like others.*” Moving beyond the guilt is necessary though, to continue to grow and learn. Maya Angelou says it best, “*Do the best you can until you know better, then when you know better, do better.*”

As a parent and a Special Education Teacher in the Public School System, I have great interest in this bill and in raising literacy in this state. I also have grave concerns for the Retention or any type of Smart Promotion portions of this bill and several other underprepared sections of this bill. I have seen the consequences of our current literacy interventions first hand as a teacher of 22 years. I am also the wife and mother of dyslexic individuals and struggled through high school with challenges in reading comprehension myself. I feel very torn between the urgency to meet with this committee in person and my struggling students' need for my services in the classroom. Both are vital to our future.

I fully understand and share the concern that students who are not taught to read in early grades are unprepared for life after high school. **Retention will not fix this problem**, it will only exacerbate it, adding insult to injury in essence. Smart Promotion—sounds nice, but in reality, kids *know* who have been retained or why others are participating in Science but not their Reading class - without explanation, there is a natural need for kids to learn about the others in their group. These short-sighted fixes are appalling to me as an educator where we KNOW, beyond anything else, a student's sense of self, expectations, confidence and self-esteem, are the number one keys to successfully reaching and teaching them, as evidenced by vast amounts of research.

There is a large gaping hole in this bill, it is the absence of the largest reading difference, dyslexia. **There is no mention of dyslexia anywhere in this bill.** Research shows that dyslexia affects up to 20% of the population and up to 80% of those with a Learning Disability. Statistically, they are likely the highest percentage of students in Title I programs throughout the state as well since failure in those programs feeds the LD programs. These are not small numbers. Many intervention programs use LLI or another form of Fountas & Pinnell which does not remediate dyslexia. I can tell you that teachers and intervention specialists are working very hard to do what they think is best for children who struggle to read/write – but they only have the illusion of knowledge in teaching & remediating literacy. Once that illusion is unveiled, teachers work differently with students to provide evidence-based, proven interventions for dyslexia, which, are proven to work for ALL students which **will serve to strengthen ALL of our children.**

There is more to dyslexia than just reading and spelling issues though for many students. Dyslexia runs on a spectrum as wide as Autism does, affecting people of all ages for life in a variety of ways, **NOT** just reading. If you live it, you understand what I am saying, if not, then it can be difficult to ascertain. Although I have known that my husband is dyslexic and possessed this knowledge for nearly 28 years, our understanding was so shallow that it was known only as “that’s why he doesn’t read well”. I’ve been an educator for 22 years and **only truly known and understood dyslexia, its characteristics and impact on students, for 6 years** when my son was devastated by his very early school experiences. He, like my husband, is deeply affected by dyslexia which in addition to reading and spelling, it also affects his executive functioning skills, language processing and expressive skills and recall of rote memorization.

When the increase of autism came into the school system 8-10 years ago, any teacher who wanted information could sign up for a variety of training opportunities. Because of that, we have greatly improved the service to these students and decreased the incidents of behavior which impacts a classroom less; allowing for more instruction—it’s a win-win situation. Why dyslexia, which affects 1 in 5 students vs. autism which affects 1 in 69 students (at the time of my ASD training stats were 1 in over 100) is **not** addressed in schools is atrocious, oppressive and against all common sense and logic.

My son has been fortunate to have had some very caring teachers, especially in his formative years who sought more information on dyslexia and who fostered his strengths. Without those few teachers and his parents who understand how much effort he puts in daily, he would not have any saving graces to keep his motivation intact. He is a perfect example of what “could be” if we didn’t have his back. I ask you to imagine what it would be like to face failure after failure in a classroom for 7 hours a day for 12 years of your life without any home support or any teachers having the knowledge to help you navigate your learning difference. What do you think your chances would be to grow up as a cynical, angry, quick to give up on the system, adult? Without understanding the far-reaching damage ignoring dyslexia can wreak, we are setting our children up to learn how to fake it ‘til you make it out of school. **NOT because we didn’t retain them, but because we didn’t understand this learning difference enough to help them.**

After much remediation, my son is a very accurate word reader but he is a slower reader, he scores in the 1st percentile on fluency assessments---that means 99 out of 100 kids will read the same chapter faster and use far less energy than he will on a daily basis, all day long. He, like many kids in his situation are tutored **after** school, **not in school where it should be occurring.** The highest need he has is tutored at the end of a long day of dipping into every bucket of energy reserves to complete his school tasks, sports (for his self-esteem and self-discipline skills) and my job as a teacher and taxi driver for 4 kids. Is this ideal? Absolutely not, but it’s the best we can do right now. Schools are strapped too--I’m not sure if you realize how ridiculous government oversight is inside of a school building. There is a remedial class at his school for At-Risk students -- paid for via Title I or 31A monies but he is not allowed in that class because he is one of the few who actually qualify for Special Education Services which is serviced with different monies and cannot be blended; scheduling conflicts also impede this service; additionally, a lack of understanding of dyslexia and how to remediate it impacts decisions as well. I am proud of his accomplishments but in school, he is not learning how to read any faster or decreasing the energy it takes for him to read. None of these foundational skills are able to be addressed because of funding stipulations by government entities and a lack of teacher training. What a travesty. What a missed opportunity.

If this bill had been in place when Anthony was a third grader, he would have been retained. That means he would have attended school the following year in the same grade as his cousin where he would have faced very real realities for the rest of his life--his cousin and friends knowing he failed--there would likely have been irreparable damage to his self-esteem and confidence. His motivation would have been killed. **Every school year I have students who live in fear of failing and being retained.** The anxiety they are under blocks the learning of skills from being absorbed into their long-term memory. There are many lost opportunities of learning when children’s anxiety is high. There is a large amount of evidence and research proving that anxiety hinders progress and acquisition of skills.

As a teacher, I hear the following statement far too often from teachers and administrators: “We all have those kids who just don’t learn to read.” This statement and belief has become the norm. It is a blame statement that is pushed onto the student and the parent. It is very likely that I agreed to that same statement years ago, early in my career. Over the years, I’ve done enough research to know that **96% of kids can learn to read.** Because of that, I found training that will get **my** skills to the level in which I can expect to reach that statistic. Until then, I didn’t know it was possible because of the pervasive, misguided belief of our educational system. The only reason I have reached this level is because I was given a lens through which to look through that was different than any of my training provided. **I experienced what**

it was like to be on the receiving end of very well-meaning and caring teachers who were ill-prepared to teach my son who has a learning difference, which left untreated would have become a disability.

The knowledge and training I sought and received has mostly been on my own time and at my own expense and has been slow-going BUT very worthwhile for all of my students. I have seen my students' scores soar where they were stagnate before. I have watched my students' self-worth and skills increase to the degree that they go back to their peers to teach **them** something about literacy. My students' families have raised the expectations of their children as well as their teachers. **This bill, HB 4822, has some very valuable components but in just a few small areas, it is just as devastating.** I invite you to consider amending the bill to close these major gaps and loopholes by inviting experts in dyslexia and teachers with similar experiences as mine to the table to help make this bill as good as it can be, not just decent, but exceptional. There is much legislation around the country aimed at improving literacy through addressing dyslexia, Florida is **not** one to model legislation from. The State of Michigan is aiming high, let's put our best foot forward to reach that target.

I appreciate your time in reading this lengthy letter. I highlighted sections for quicker reference. I appreciate and value your time in serving the citizens of this state. Thank you for your service.

Sincerely Yours in Education and Citizenry,

Lisa T. Barnett,
Parent,
Special Education Teacher,
Founding Member of Decoding Dyslexia MI

4223 Cahokia Ridge
Linden, MI 48451
810-394-1324
seethebeautyindyslexia@gmail.com